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A nation divided by one language

Politics still obscure the real debate about the United States' language policy, says James Crawford

guardian.co.uk, Thursday 8 March 2001

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"If you live in America, you need to speak English." According to a Los Angeles Times poll, that was how three out of four voters explained their support for Proposition 227, the 1998 ballot initiative that dismantled bilingual education in California. Many Arizonans cited the same reason for passing a similar measure (Proposition 203) last year.

Ambiguous as it is, this rationale offers some clues about the way Americans think about language. No doubt for some the statement has a patriotic subtext: one flag, one language. Rejecting bilingual education was a way to "send a message" that, in the United States, English and only English is appropriate for use in the public square.

Other voters merely seemed intent on restating the obvious. English is so dominant in the US that non-English speakers are at a huge disadvantage. Thus schools must not fail to teach English to children from minority language backgrounds. Students' life chances will depend to a large extent on the level of English literacy skills they achieve.

Immigrants have generally understood these truths more keenly than anyone, and behaved accordingly. As the linguist Einar Haugen observes, "America's profusion of tongues has made her a modern Babel, but a Babel in reverse."

There is no reason to think the historic pattern has changed. Although the number of minority language speakers has grown dramatically in recent years, thanks to a liberalisation of immigration laws in 1965, so has their rate of acculturation. Census figures confirm the paradox. While one in seven US residents now speaks a language other than English at home, bilingualism is also on the rise. A century ago the proportion of non-English speakers was nearly five times as large. As the population becomes increasingly diverse, newcomers seem to be acquiring the national language more rapidly than ever before.

The political problem is that many Americans have trouble believing all this. One conservative organisation claims: "Tragically, many immigrants these days refuse to learn English! They never become productive members of society. They remain stuck in a linguistic and economic ghetto, many living off welfare and costing working Americans millions of tax dollars every year."

Such perceptions are not uncommon. Perhaps this is because Americans who came of age before the 1970s had little experience of linguistic diversity. Growing up in a period of tight immigration quotas, they seldom encountered anyone speaking a language

other than English, except foreign tourists.

So today, when Spanish and Vietnamese are heard routinely in public and when bilingual government services in Tagalog and Gujarati are not unknown, some Americans conclude that the hegemony of English is threatened, and perhaps their "way of life" as well. Suddenly they are endorsing coercive measures, as suggested by the US English lobby, to "defend our common language". An English Only movement based on these premises came to prominence in the 80s. Thus far it has succeeded in legislating English as the official language of 23 states, although such declarations have been primarily symbolic, with few legal effects as yet.

The campaign's ideological effects have been more significant. In particular English Only agitation has made bilingual schooling a lightning rod for political attacks from people concerned about immigration policy, cultural change and the expansion of minority rights. Debating the best way to teach English to children becomes a form of shadow-boxing that has less to do with pedagogical issues than with questions of social status and political power.

It does not help that the pedagogical issues are so poorly understood. Monolinguals tend to regard language learning as a zero-sum game. Any use of children's mother tongue for instruction, the assumption goes, is a diversion from English acquisition. Thus assigning English learners to bilingual classrooms would seem to delay their education.

Research has shown that precisely the opposite is true. Far from a waste of learning time, native-language lessons support the process of acquiring a second language while keeping students from falling behind in other subjects.

Stephen Krashen, of the University of Southern California, has documented the "transfer" of literacy skills and academic knowledge between various languages ? even when alphabets differ substantially. "We learn to read by reading, by making sense of what we see on the page," Krashen explains. Thus "it will be much easier to learn to read in a language we already understand". And literacy need not be relearned as additional languages are acquired. "Once you can read, you can read."

Other studies confirm that by the time children leave well-structured bilingual programs, typically after four to five years, they are outperforming their counterparts in non-bilingual programs, and in some cases students from native-English backgrounds as well. Yet such success stories remain poorly publicised. Until recently bilingual educators have done little to explain their methods and goals, while the US media have become increasingly sceptical. "If all I knew about bilingual education was what I read in the newspapers," says Krashen, "I'd vote against it, too."

Mixed messages have compounded the public relations problem. Bilingual education, which began as an effort to guarantee equal educational opportunities, is increasingly promoted as a form of multicultural enrichment. To counter the English Only mentality, advocates have coined the slogan English Plus. They argue that the US remains an underdeveloped country where language skills are concerned. In a global economy more multilingualism, not less, would clearly advance the national interest.

Some English-speaking parents have been receptive to the "bilingual is beautiful"

pitch. Over the past decade a growing number have enrolled their children in "dual immersion" classrooms alongside minority children learning English. Yet despite excellent reports on this method of cultivating fluency in two languages, no more than 20,000 English-background students are participating. Compare that with the 300,000 Canadian anglophones in French immersion programmes, in a country with one-tenth the population of the US.

By and large English Plus appeals primarily to language educators and ethnic leaders - that is, to those who already value bilingual skills. Other Americans remain suspicious of the "plus". Most harbour the false impression that bilingual education is primarily about maintaining Hispanic culture. Knowing a foreign language is wonderful, they say, but shouldn't English come first? The US language policy debate rarely seems to get past that question.

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